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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

January 8, 1992

Richard W. Teare
EAP/IMBS
U.S. Department of State
Washington DC 20520-6310

Dear Mr. Teare:

I am writing to suggest that we revise our East Timor policy, specifically, that we take a stand in favor of self-determination for the people of East Timor and that we encourage the Indonesian government to allow a U.N.-supervised plebiscite on the issue to take place.

What moves me to do so is the strong evidence of the last few months, the events before and after the November 12 massacre in Dili, of determined opposition to continued Indonesian rule on the part of a substantial percentage of the population, including the educated youth who have no memory of the Portuguese period.

Indonesia's 1975 invasion and 1976 formal integration of East Timor were motivated primarily by security considerations. The colony's strongest political organization, Fretilin, appeared to be Marxist-oriented. The New Order government of President Soeharto had only recently defeated its own communist opposition. Moreover, it feared the influence in the region both of the People's Republic of China and of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which had taken power in southern Vietnam just months before.

The American government, under President Ford, did not object to the Indonesian action. I think there were three reasons for this: the U.S. understood Indonesia's fear of a Marxist government in the middle of its territory; we were also concerned ourselves about communist influence in the region; and our relationship with remote East Timor, whose people numbered only about 600,000, seemed much less important than our relationship with Indonesia.

In 1992, most of these factors are very different. The Indonesian government no longer faces a credible leftist threat to its security either domestically or regionally. And the American government is no longer mobilizing support and maintaining an alliance against a Cold War enemy.

It is true that East Timor is still a very small place, and much less important to American interests in Southeast Asia than giant In-

donesia, with a population of over 180,000,000 and an archipelagic territory spanning a sixth of the world's circumference. Indonesia's oil and natural gas are important to Japan and thus to us. The Soeharto government's adoption of and continued adherence to, with our encouragement and advice, a market-oriented economic growth policy is a major achievement. The resulting domestic peace and prosperity has made it possible for Indonesia to play a constructive leadership role in ASEAN and a moderating role in the Third World generally.

For all these reasons, we need and want to maintain a good relationship with Indonesia. But that does not preclude some disagreements over matters where our views and interests differ.

One of these areas is East Timor. Americans long ago made a commitment to upholding the principle of self-determination of peoples. Post-World War II examples are our broad support for decolonization in Africa and Asia, our "captive nations" policy in eastern Europe and the Baltic states, and our support for Israel. President Bush has reaffirmed the principle not only in opposing the seizure of Kuwait by Iraq, but also by recognizing the right of Palestinians to a homeland.

There is, in my view, a solid logic underlying this commitment. In the long run, Americans will be more secure in a world of democratic states, and self-determination is a prerequisite to democracy. In East Timor, as in Africa and Asia generally, in Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the Middle East, there can be no meaningful democracy until unfree peoples become free.

Another important dimension of the Timor question is the debilitating effect the independence struggle there is having on the democratization process in Indonesia. It is not that I hold out great hope for democracy in Indonesia in the near future. The Indonesian army is too strong, even too legitimate (because of its successes in achieving both order and development), and popular forces are too weak for us to expect much change even in the early years of President Soeharto's successor's rule.

Popular pro-democratic forces do exist, however, and have been growing. Many urban middle class professionals, development activists who have created an extensive network of non-governmental organizations, moderate Muslims of both reformist and traditional types, the latter with deep roots in the villages, and even some members of the civilian bureaucracy and government political party can be counted in the democratic camp.

The main obstacle to democratization is the Indonesian army, most of whose officers seem to see themselves as engaged in a kind of permanent war against the forces of chaos, which they define as communists, proponents of an Islamic state, and regional separatists. The credibility -- perhaps even within the officers' corps -- of the first two of these threats has steadily diminished over the years. The third is constantly renewed by events at the extremities of the archipelago, in Aceh and Irian Jaya, and in East Timor.

There are important differences among these three areas, however, differences with consequences for democratization in Indonesia and for the shaping of our foreign policy. The Acehnese freely joined Indonesia at the time of the independence revolution in 1945. Provincial leaders did break off relations with and fight a guerrilla war against the center in the early 1950s. Since the rebels' defeat in the late 1950s, however, there has been no doubt, despite occasional localized outbursts of discontent with central policies, that Aceh is irrevocably a part of Indonesia.

The case of Irian Jaya is somewhat closer to that of East Timor. Long neglected by its Dutch overlords, Irian at the end of World War II was virtually without a modern elite that could connect to the largely pro-Indonesian Western-educated elites in the rest of the archipelago. At the transfer of sovereignty in 1949, Indonesia reluctantly acceded to a Dutch demand that the status of the territory be negotiated later. The subsequent decade of Dutch rule and the heavy-handed way in which the Indonesian government finally took power in the early 1960s appear to have solidified a sense of separateness from and hostility to Indonesia on the part of many local people.

There are, nonetheless, at least two crucial distinctions between the Irian and Timor cases. Irian Jaya was a part of Netherlands India, to which Indonesia is the successor state, and East Timor was not. Every Indonesian government since independence has recognized that Indonesia is the former Netherlands India, and no government has made a larger territorial claim. Second, the independence movement in East Timor appears to be much more intensely and pervasively supported than that in Irian Jaya. Even the Jakarta-appointed East Timor governor, Mario Carrascalao, admitted in a recent interview that most of his people want freedom from Indonesia.

The implications of the Timor situation for Jakarta politics cut two ways. On the one hand, the heightened struggle provides further justification to Indonesian army officers for their continued repressive rule -- under the "twin functions" doctrine -- of the country as a whole. Because the commitment to independence in Timor is so strong, we can probably expect an ascending spiral of violence there over the next several years. Side-effects are likely to include a heightened "bunker mentality" within the Indonesian army and more willingness to use repression elsewhere.

On the other hand, as far as I can tell support among most Indonesians for the integration of Timor is shallow. The issue -- unlike Aceh and Irian Jaya -- does not cut to the core of what defines their identity as a people. No Indonesian government, including Soeharto's New Order before 1975, ever made a territorial claim to East Timor. There was no national mobilization at the time of the invasion. In other words, integration is a narrowly-supported policy with weak nationalist legitimation. This means that U.S. policy can have an impact, if not on the government of the 70 year-old Soeharto, which has probably shed too much army blood in Timor to be willing to withdraw now, then on

the successor who is likely to take power sometime in the 1990s.

What I am proposing is that the United States support the call for a plebiscite, under United Nations supervision, in which the people of East Timor are given the opportunity to choose whether they wish to remain part of Indonesia or to become independent. This should be accompanied by direct representations to the Indonesian government and by lobbying to build an international pro-plebiscite coalition.

I am not recommending, however, that we change our basic attitude toward Indonesia, for example by threatening to cut off aid or apply other economic sanctions. Such actions would be a disproportionate response to the importance of the problem, seen in the context of our other commitments and interests. They would also likely be counter productive, encouraging the Soeharto government to seek protection behind a smokescreen of nationalist outrage. What I foresee instead is the steady application of low-key pressure, within the broader pattern of continuing support, over several years, until the combined effects of international opposition, domestic Indonesian political change, and events in Timor itself reach a critical mass.

Sincerely,

R. William Liddle
Professor